

VZCZCXRO1016
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHGP #0441/01 1311113

ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 111113Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6685
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2309

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000441

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS - M. COPPOLA
NEW DELHI FOR J. EHRENDRICH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PTER PGOV PREL SN

SUBJECT: TERRORIST MAS SELAMAT CAUGHT: SECURITY TRIUMPH OR
PR COUP?

REF: 08 SINGAPORE 236

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Malaysian authorities recaptured fugitive Jemaah Islamiah (JI) terrorist Mas Selamat Kastari across the border from Singapore on April 1. Singapore media first reported the news on May 8, following up with days of extensive coverage praising Singapore-Malaysia cooperation and the Singapore security services' alleged role in the arrest while warning of the continued threat of terrorism. Singapore officials pressed the same themes in their public statements. Meanwhile, the Malaysian government was more circumspect, confirming the arrest but providing no confirmation of Singaporean participation in the operation or of a potential handover of Mas Selamat to Singapore authorities. Online skeptics hunted for inconsistencies in the official Singapore line and asked pointed questions about Singapore's role in the arrest. End Summary.

Malaysian Authorities Capture Fugitive Terrorist

¶2. (SBU) Malaysian authorities recaptured fugitive Jemaah Islamiah (JI) terrorist Mas Selamat Kastari on April 1, the government-linked Singapore media reported May 8. Mas Selamat was reportedly hiding near Johor Baru, just across the causeway connecting Singapore to peninsular Malaysia. He had escaped from the custody of Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) on February 27, 2008 (reftel), sparking an island-wide manhunt that failed to prevent him from swimming across the Johor Strait to Malaysia using an improvised flotation device.

Local Media and Authorities Celebrate GOS's Role in Capture

¶3. (SBU) Singapore's main daily newspaper, the government-linked Straits Times, has published extensive coverage of Mas Selamat's recapture. The coverage emphasizes two principal themes. First, it highlights cooperation between Singaporean and Malaysian authorities, claiming that the ISD supplied a crucial lead that enabled Malaysian authorities to catch Mas Selamat, assigning Singapore authorities a substantial share of the credit for a successful "joint operation," and anticipating Mas Selamat's repatriation to Singapore. Second, it warns that terrorism remains a regional threat despite Mas Selamat's rearrest, pointing out that his ability to evade authorities for more than a year raises questions about the continuing viability of JI networks previously thought to have been seriously degraded.

¶4. (SBU) Singapore officials reinforced the media message in their public statements. Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng, whose ministry oversees the ISD and who bore the brunt of criticism for Mas

Selamat's escape, held a press conference May 9. After reporting that Malaysian authorities informed Singapore of the arrest soon after it occurred, Wong heaped praise on the ISD for its claimed role in the affair, as well as on Malaysian Special Branch. Officials tempered their overall tone of celebration by admonishing Singaporeans to continue taking the threat of terrorism seriously, with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, and Foreign Minister George Yeo all urging the public not to let down its guard.

Malaysians Stay Quiet, Bloggers Ask Uncomfortable Questions

¶5. (SBU) The days-long trumpeting of the capture by Singapore media and officialdom contrasts sharply with the Malaysian authorities' more muted approach. The news appeared first in the Singapore press, before any public announcement by the Malaysian government. Though an unnamed Malaysian senior official confirmed for the Straits Times that Mas Selamat was in custody under Malaysia's Internal Security Act, Prime Minister Najib Razak addressed the issue only in response to press reports. Despite DPM Wong's assertion that Malaysia would return Mas Selamat to Singapore "in good time" after questioning him, the Malaysian government has not so far made any public statement on that point. Nor have Malaysian authorities confirmed ISD participation in Mas Selamat's rearrest or a "joint operation" by the two countries' security services.

¶6. (SBU) The reasons for the timing of the Mas Selamat revelations remain unclear. Though DPM Wong said that

SINGAPORE 00000441 002 OF 002

Malaysia informed Singapore soon after the April 1 arrest, Singapore authorities closely held the information, with only a few officials in the know. Foreign Minister Yeo, for example, has said he still did not know about the arrest two weeks after it took place. Singapore officials say they did not want to compromise follow-up investigations, but they finally chose to announce the capture because the story had leaked to a Straits Times journalist through unspecified channels and was about to be published anyway. Given the close links between Singapore government policy and the material published in the Straits Times, whose parent company is owned by the GOS, this explanation raises as many questions as it answers.

¶7. (SBU) The government's jubilation at exorcising the embarrassment of Mas Selamat's escape has not deterred a chorus of online skeptics from raising pointed questions. Some are openly casting doubt on the GOS's claims about its role in the operation. One online critic noted that Malaysian media have credited Malaysian Special Branch and local police for the arrest, giving Singapore no more than equal billing with Indonesia as a source of information used in the operation. At least two bloggers posted excerpts from a speech DPM Wong delivered in mid-April 2009 - well after he allegedly knew about the capture - in which Wong stated that he was being regularly updated on the ISD's efforts to track Mas Selamat and expressed confidence that "we will recapture him." One blogger who found this inconsistent with Wong's more recent statements concluded, "Mr. Wong, really, please clarify and don't think that Singaporeans are fools."

Visit Embassy Singapore's Classified website:
http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eap/singapore/ind_ex.cfm
SHIELDS